

8-22-21

Pentecost 13

1 Kings 8:22-30, 42-43

Where God Lives

Whitney and Carol Rawlings have taken a few trips in the past year or so that took them into my home state of Kentucky. Every time they've gone up that way, they send me a picture when they cross the state line and ask if they need me to do anything or look up anybody while they're there. My sister lives up there, and we have several friends in Kentucky, but I always tell Whitney and Carol the same thing when they ask. No, everybody's OK, but if you happen to run into God, be sure and tell him Hello for me. Because we all know that Kentucky is where God lives! At least except for a few weeks in the fall. Then he moves to Tuscaloosa!

I'm sure that not everyone here agrees with all of that, but we all have our own ideas about where God lives. Most Sundays when I welcome you here, I tell you how good it is to have you in God's House. Week after week, we gather here, but we don't really expect to encounter God in a physical sense. Not in the way we would if you stopped by my house, or I stopped by yours and we got to see one another. We do encounter God here; if we don't something's not quite right. But that encounter is of a more spiritual nature than a physical one. God's House takes all kinds of forms, from the simplest most unadorned places of worship to the most ornate places people gather.

The story that we encounter today is about one of those more ornate places.

For generations, God lived among the people. God had promised Abraham that he would always be with him, that he would bless his life and make him the father of a great nation. That nation found itself enslaved in Egypt, and God led them out

with the promise of a land and a home. All along the journey toward that promise, the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Tablets of the Law that Moses had received from God along that journey was the sign of God's presence among the people. Because the people were constantly on the move, the Ark went with them, and was housed in a tabernacle or a tent where the people gathered for worship. This system served the people well as a constant reminder of God's presence with them.

Eventually, the people settled in that Land of Promise, made themselves at home there. Some prospered. They chose Kings for themselves. Sometimes that worked well for them. Sometimes not. When David became King, the nation prospered in ways it had not before. And David lived in a palace fit for a king. Eventually, David thought how awkward it was that he was living in a house of splendor and God still lived in a tent. So he decided he would build a Temple, a House for God, a seat of worship and community life. David went to the Prophet Nathan, which is how even the King communicated with God in those days, and announced his plan to build a House for God and asked Nathan the Prophet to let God know that he would no longer live in a tent, but that David intended to build him a splendid new home.

We might think this would have been an acceptable plan. David was, after all, the one God chose to be King after Saul failed to be worthy of the office. David was a man after God's own heart. David was much beloved by both the people and by God. So it would make sense to us that David would start a Building Fund and a Capital Campaign and hire architects to come up with plans for a splendid House where God could live.

But how many times have we heard that God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts? What makes perfect sense to us is not always the center of God's will. It turns out that God sent word through the Prophet that David would not build him a house. Thank you very much, God said, but I don't recall asking you to build me a house. All the time that I have lived among you, I have been content to live among the

people, to be a part of daily life, both worship and work. I didn't ask you to build me a house apart from the people!

A couple of things speak across the ages at this point. Most of us want reminders that God is with us. This building has set on this corner for nearly a hundred years, and another one sat on this spot for forty years before that and reminded this community that God was a foundational part of it from the beginning. Everyone who has passed by this place for all those years has seen tangible evidence of God's presence here. Those of us who worship here know that presence in abiding ways. But everyone in town passes by here sooner or later and is reminded that God is in this place. I don't know how absolutely true it is, but I remember from one of the historical events we've had since I've lived here hearing the story that Colonel McComb, who founded this town, marked this spot and said, "My church will sit there." So we can identify with David's desire to build a house for God. I never knew Colonel McComb, but apparently he never got word from God that God was not happy about his plans. I don't know where the faithful met while that first building and then later this one were being built. But God was in the midst of the life of this community from its beginning.

It continues to be important for us to consider what God wants as we make plans about our ministry and its future. The Church has made lots of changes and decisions through the years, but the Church has been most faithful when it asked God what God wanted and then paid attention to the answer.

What God told David was not what David wanted to hear. People have come up with all kinds of reasons why God didn't allow David to be the one to build the Temple. Some think it was because of that unfortunate business with Bathsheba. Others say it was because David waged war against God's best counsel. Others have other suggestions about why God would not allow this man after his own heart to build God a house. I don't know God's mind about any of that, but it's enough to know that God said no. God said that David's son, Solomon, the product of that Bathsheba business, who would build the Temple.

And Solomon did. And a splendid place it was that Solomon built. What we read this morning is the prayer that Solomon prayed when the Temple was dedicated.

Imagine the planning, the fund raising, the physical work involved in that project. I have been involved in a few building projects along the way in my career. Nothing of the scope of Solomon's Temple, of course, but important efforts to build or to add on to a House for God. We've never built a house. Some of you have. We've lived in a couple of new houses, but all the decisions had been made before we showed up. We didn't have to pick out the drawer pulls or the floor coverings. I remember when we built the church in Huntsville. The only conflict we had in the whole process was over carpet color, and someone wound up leaving the church because it wound up being green instead of red with black spots in it. The one who left thought it was in the Bible somewhere that you had to have red carpet with black spots to represent the blood of Jesus covering the sin of the world. I never understood why there were still black spots if the blood of Jesus had covered all the sin, but I never brought that up in a Building Committee meeting, either! Imagine all that Solomon oversaw to get the Temple built. Other parts of Scripture give us elaborate detail about every gold covering, every inch of space used for the worship of God.

When all of that was done, even Solomon recognized the futility of trying to build a house for God. Right in the middle of his prayer, he finds himself asking, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth?" Solomon knew what we all discover: it is not our intention or our call to build something that can contain God. As special a place as this room is to those of us who call it both our home and God's, we know that God does not live here in the same way that I live in that house over on Mississippi Street. Solomon figured out that the best he could do was to create a place toward which God would look with grace and blessing when people gathered there. When people come to the Temple to pray, he said, God would hear their prayers and forgive their sin.

I know that many of us come here to pray. I hope that this is not all the praying you do. I know that many of you pray at home, in the car, and wherever else you find yourself. But there is something about praying in the Church that makes us think God is more apt to hear us here than in all those other places. Back when we could do such things, we set aside time during Holy Week before Easter for you to come to the classrooms just around that corner and experience prayer in particular ways. We set up some special way to pray in different rooms over there. Some involved music. Some used art as a launching pad. Some gave you opportunity to pray for particular needs of people we knew. Some were of different sorts. But the most popular option for prayer was to provide opportunity for you to come into this room and just sit and pray. Hopefully we will do that again one day. Some of you still come by here sometimes and ask us to come over and open up this building so you can pray here. You always can. That's what Solomon knew: not that God was hemmed up in here somewhere, but that God's presence was so real here and in the Temple he built that people would find ways to experience it.

God's House, whatever form it takes, is always a house of prayer, a place where we experience God's presence together and alone, a place where God lives and we're invited to live with him. It is, indeed, a special place for those who call this both God's home and ours.

The Church in Scottsboro, Alabama has a beautiful worship space, as we do. It is different in many ways, but it is beautiful, as all churches are in one way or another. I arrived as pastor there in 1994, following a long-tenured and much beloved pastor who moved away voluntarily. Shortly after we arrived there, that former pastor's wife came back to visit, and we met. They had been there fifteen or so years, and she was not altogether happy that they weren't there anymore. When I met her, we were standing in that sanctuary. You could tell it was a special place to her. She had baptized children there, buried friends there, took communion there, did all the things that make

places like this special to us. I had been there about a month. It was a room. In time, I baptized children there. I buried people I cared about from there. I served and took communion there. Preached in the same pulpit from which both her husband and Dr. Pepper had preached before me. In time that room became a very special place to me. I can see it in my mind's eye even now. But then it was a room. It had pink walls. She was so happy to be back there that she said, "Is this not the most inspiring, the most beautiful place you have ever seen?" It wasn't. Not yet. But I didn't tell her that.

I was a stranger there then. But I didn't stay a stranger for long.

Solomon had things to say about strangers in places like this too. He said that they're supposed to be welcome. That when strangers come and don't know what a special place this is, it's our job to help them find God's presence here so that can know what we know, so they can experience what we experience, so they can feel what we feel in God's House.

If we build a house for God, then it must be a place where all God's people are welcome. And God's people are all people. Not just those who know the secret handshakes. Not just those who know when to stand and when to sit. Not just those who can quote the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order. When strangers come, our call is to find ways for them not to stay strangers, but to become friends, to become our brothers and sisters.

We can't do that if we don't allow them to bring their own experience with God into our space. We can't do that if we think we've got God hemmed up in here somewhere and that we can decide when to let him out and when to keep him closed up. If we build a house for God, then it needs to be a place where God decides how to encounter us, a place where we hear God speak and feel God's presence. A place where God lives is a place where all people are welcome. Solomon knew that. I think we do, too. But many weren't sure then, and some still aren't. If God

is to dwell among us here, it must be on God's terms and not on ours. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Faithful and Loving God, there is no one like you in heaven or on earth. Even heaven itself cannot contain you, yet by your own gracious choice you live among us and hear and answer our prayers. So we are thankful for this opportunity to lift our hearts and our prayers to you in this, one of your many houses, this day. We pray by the power and inspiration of your Spirit, your gift to us. We believe not only that you have the words of life, but that you want to share them with us so that we can share them with the world.

We pray for the Church today, that it will stand firm in the strength of your power in the midst of challenges and opportunities we have not had before, that we will strive to overcome evil and to proclaim the Gospel of peace to all the world, beginning here at the corner of Third and Delaware and extending to places none of us will ever go as we work in partnership with people like Mark Adams on the border and others who serve through Presbyterian World Mission, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, and Living Waters for the World.

Help us to care for this place where you have put us to live and work and to provide for ourselves. Help us to nourish, sustain, and shelter ourselves and all who depend on your world to survive.

We pray for those who govern and rule over us in all the world. Chaos seems to be in charge right now, but we know this is not your will and that, if we will turn to you, we can find order and peace. We pray for all who live in danger whether down the street or on the other side of the world. We pray that your intention of peace and justice might guide the decisions of all who govern and of all who follow their leadership.

We pray that we would find ways to protect and comfort the weak, the innocent, the young, and that we would hear the cries of strangers and forgotten people. We pray especially today for our

college and university students who are beginning and continuing their education, some in new places and new adventures. Keep them safe and remind them of your love and ours as they begin this year's journey.

Strengthen our faith, Loving God; deepen our love for you and for one another, empower our witness so that the world might know your love, and peace might come even in our own time.

We pray for the sick and all who are in trouble in these days. For those who have contracted Covid and for those who care for them. For all whose regular illnesses need care when beds are in short supply and caregivers are overworked and stressed. We pray for those dear to us and to those we do not know, that healing might come and that this pandemic might subside. Help us to take advantage of every opportunity we have to hasten its end.

We pray for all who depend on your mercy, knowing that we are chief among that number and that your mercy is sure and reliable. Lord, you are our strength and our hope. With joy and faithful hope, we entrust these, our prayers, to you, counting on the assurance of your love made known to us through Jesus Christ, who taught us all to pray together when he said: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.